The meeting was called to order at 11.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I would like to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, and to give him the floor.

The Secretary-General: I am here to report on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), which the Council adopted unanimously on 24 February. But I am keenly aware that I am doing so just as the bloodletting in Syria enters its eighth year. I would like to highlight just one stark fact on this grimmest of anniversaries, which is that in 2017, more children were killed in Syria than in any other year since the war began. I am deeply saddened by the immense loss and cascading suffering of the Syrian people. And I am deeply disappointed by all those who, year after year, by action or inaction, design or indifference, have allowed this to happen.

My grief and frustration are compounded by all that I know of the people of Syria. As United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the aftermath of the Iraq war, I saw the remarkable hospitality of the Syrian people in hosting 1.5 million Iraqi refugees — not in camps, but in their communities across the country. Syria was a place where refugees could live in security as they tried to rebuild their lives and raise their families. Today, so many of those generous Syrians who shared so much have themselves been forced from their homes, becoming refugees or internally displaced. In neighbouring countries — whose enormous hospitality I have also witnessed, but who are burdened by overwhelming needs — the vast majority of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line. Many of the Syrians who journeyed even farther from home in search of safety have found the doors that they once opened to others in need shut in their faces. A country known for its ancient civilization and a people known for their rich diversity have been betrayed, and Syria is bleeding inside and out. There should be one agenda only for all of us — ending the suffering of the Syrian people and finding a political solution to the conflict. And the Council has a particular responsibility in that regard.

Let me now turn to the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) and the issue of the compliance of all the relevant parties in Syria. I do so with a caveat. The United Nations is following developments closely, but we do not have the full picture, owing to our limited presence and restricted access on the ground. Resolution 2401 (2018) demands that all parties "cease hostilities without delay, and engage immediately to ensure full and comprehensive implementation ... for a durable humanitarian pause for at least 30 consecutive days throughout Syria", while still countering Da'esh and other groups designated as terrorists by the Council. It is true that in some areas, such as Deir ez-Zor and Douma, where there has been a recent ceasefire that I will address later, the conflict is diminishing in intensity. Yet there has been no cessation of hostilities. Violence continues in eastern Ghouta and beyond, including in Afrin, parts of Idlib and into Damascus and its suburbs. In eastern Ghouta in particular, the air strikes, shelling and ground offensives have intensified since the resolution's adoption and have claimed hundreds of civilian lives. Some reports even put the toll at more than 1,000.

The resolution further demands the enabling of "the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and services". Despite some limited convoy deliveries, the provision of humanitarian aid and services has been neither safe, unimpeded or sustained. The resolution calls on "all parties to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas, including in eastern Ghouta, Yarmouk, Fo'ah and Kafraya". No sieges have been lifted. The resolution demands medical evacuations of the critically sick and wounded. To our knowledge, not one critically sick or wounded person has so far been evacuated. But I will come back to that later in relation to a recent announcement. The resolution reiterates its demand "reminding in particular the Syrian authorities, that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international human rights law, as applicable, and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians". And I remind all involved that even efforts to combat groups identified as terrorists by the Council do not supersede those obligations. Yet we

see egregious violations, indiscriminate attacks and a failure to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), my Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and I have been focused on helping to create the conditions for a cessation of hostilities in eastern Ghouta, where, as I said to the Council two weeks ago, people have been living in a hell on Earth (see S/PV.8185). As the Special Envoy told the Council a few days ago, eastern Ghouta is the most urgent situation, because it is where we have the clearest potential to try to support the de-escalation in concrete ways, and because we have been concretely approached. On 26 February, the Russian Federation announced a five-hour daily humanitarian pause in eastern Ghouta. I will speak to that later in my remarks.

On 27 February, the President of the Security Council and I received a letter from the Syrian National Committee conveying another letter from the three armed opposition groups in eastern Ghouta — Jaysh Al-Islam, Faylaq Al-Rahman and Ahrar Al-Sham. They expressed their commitment "to the full implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions, especially resolution 2401 (2018)", and to expelling from eastern Ghouta "the armed groups of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaida and all of those belonging to them". They also promised to ensure humanitarian access and the facilitation of the work of United Nations agencies. On receiving the letter, the Office of the Special Envoy opened channels with all three groups, inside and outside the enclave. The respective commanders issued further letters, expressing the groups' readiness to negotiate with the Russian Federation in Geneva.

In parallel, both I and my Special Envoy engaged with the relevant authorities of the Russian Federation. My team on the ground did likewise, and also engaged with the Government of Syria. We offered the good offices of the United Nations to facilitate and observe any meeting between the representatives of the armed opposition groups, the Syrian Government and the Russian Federation. Despite our best efforts over the course of a few days, it was not possible to schedule any meeting.

Meanwhile, on 6 March, the Syrian Government addressed a letter to me and to the President of the Security Council. That letter stated that Syria positively welcomed resolution 2401 (2018), as it

> "stresses firm commitment to the Syrian State's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations Charter and calls for implementing a humanitarian truce across Syria to ensure a safe, sustainable and unhindered access of humanitarian aid."

That same day, my Special Envoy informed the Russian Federation of his intention to invite the three armed opposition groups to a meeting with the Russian Federation in Geneva three days later. On 7 March, his interlocutors replied that they did not think a meeting in Geneva was the best option and were pursuing contacts on the ground with the relevant armed opposition groups.

As those diplomatic efforts were taking place, fighting went on. The Syrian Government and its allies intensified air strikes and launched a ground offensive, progressively gaining control of parts of eastern Ghouta from about 10 per cent of the enclave on 3 March to more than 60 per cent today. The offensive initially took place in less populated areas, steadily moving to urban centres and forcing large-scale displacement.

In the follow up to the efforts I have described, it was possible on 8 and 10 March to convene two meetings between Russian officials and Jaysh Al-Islam in the outskirts of eastern Ghouta, with the United Nations as an observer. In those meetings, progress was made in relation to the removal of a number of members of the Al-Nusra Front, as well as other aspects, including the potential for a ceasefire and improved humanitarian access. The first group of Al-Nusra Front fighters and their families were since evacuated from eastern Ghouta.

Nevertheless, it has not been possible to facilitate contact between the Russian authorities and Faylak Al-Rahman. The group insisted that the meeting take place in Geneva. The Russian Federation insisted that the meeting take place on the ground. On 10 March, Government forces intensified their offensive, capturing the city of Misraba in a movement aiming at dividing the enclave into three separate areas. On the evening of that same day, the Russian Federation informed the United Nations that a unilateral ceasefire would take place at midnight, in relation to Jaysh Al-Islam in Douma. It was agreed that a meeting would be held on 11 March with the facilitation of the United Nations. On that day, with the ceasefire between the Government

and Jaysh Al-Islam forces largely holding in Douma, the meeting took place, followed by a meeting today.

As I speak to the Council now, I have not yet received a full report on the results of today's meeting. But I was informed by our people in Damascus as I was entering the Chamber that there has been progress with regard to civilian evacuations and humanitarian aid. Furthermore, I take note of a statement issued today by Jaysh Al-Islam:

> "[i] n the context of Security Council resolutions 2254 (2015) and 2401 (2018), an agreement was reached with the Russian side through the United Nations for a humanitarian medical evacuation of the wounded for treatment outside of eastern Ghouta."

We are also hearing reports of tentative initiatives, both by tribal leaders and the Russian Federation, for contact with other groups on the ground. I wish to underscore the urgency of seeing medical evacuations, civilian protection and full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, attacks on other parts of eastern Ghouta continue, with the enclave now split into three separate pockets. During this whole period, the shelling from eastern Ghouta to Damascus was also ongoing, causing dozens of civilian deaths and injuries, with some reports putting the number close to 100.

My Special Envoy and I have remained apprised at each step of the diplomatic engagement, offering support and guidance to ensure the implementation in letter and spirit of the resolution. In short, as my Special Envoy has said to the Council, we are leaving no stone unturned in trying to bring all major stakeholders to the table and contribute in a concrete fashion to find a sustainable solution for the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

As the situation continues to unfold, the Turkish offensive in Afrin — pursued with armed opposition group allies — intensified with air strikes and ground advances against Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat/People's Protection Units fighters, reinforced, in turn, by elements coming from eastern Syria, where they were combating Da'esh. Pro-Syrian Government forces have also deployed inside of Afrin. The fighting resulted in significant civilian displacement, with reports of numerous casualties and damage to infrastructure. With the cooperation of Syrian armed opposition groups, Turkish forces established a so-called buffer zone inside Syrian territory, linking northern rural Aleppo and Idlib, and surrounding Afrin from three sides. The offensive is now pushing ever closer towards the city, with its large civilian population.

Allow me to now turn to our efforts to address the humanitarian crisis. When resolution 2401 (2018) was adopted, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners stood ready to deliver. Plans were in place for multiple convoys each week to agreed-upon locations, in response to independently assessed needs. Unfortunately, the actual delivery did not match our plan. Let me describe what it was possible to do in the past two weeks.

On 1 March, humanitarian organizations delivered assistance to some 50,000 people in the hard-to-reach areas of Afrin and Tell Rifaat, north of Aleppo. On 4 March, a convoy of 19 trucks organized by the United Nations, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and partners reached Dar Kabira, in northern Homs. It provided assistance to 33,500 people of the requested 40,250. However, the Government of Syria did not allow the delivery of life-saving medicines, such as insulin, nor key items, including solar lamps, syringes and paediatric scales.

As I mentioned earlier, in eastern Ghouta, the Russian Federation unilaterally announced a daily five-hour humanitarian pause in the fighting, starting from 27 February, to prevent civilian victims and to enable civilians to leave the enclave. In reality, few civilians left. On the one hand, sufficient protection standards were not in place for voluntary movement. Moreover, armed groups prevented others from leaving.

In that context, even though the five-hour window was insufficient to enable the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and services, as demanded in the resolution, on 5 March the United Nations sent an inter-agency convoy of 46 trucks to Douma, in eastern Ghouta, with food for 27,500 people, along with health and nutrition supplies. Yet those 27,500 represented only a third of the requested beneficiaries, all in desperate need. And most of the health supplies were removed by the Syrian authorities, including basic medicines, dialysis treatments and trauma and surgical materials, such as burn dressings and adrenaline, despite the provisions of paragraph 8 of resolution 2401 (2018).

According to the World Health Organization, only about 30 per cent of medical supplies in the convoy

were allowed in. United Nations personnel from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs accompanying the convoy were also denied access to eastern Ghouta. Violence rendered the operation extremely perilous, despite prior assurances from the parties to the conflict. The insecurity forced the team to reluctantly halt unloading and to return to Damascus with a large share of the food aid still on the trucks.

On 9 March, a convoy of 13 trucks reached Douma, delivering the remaining food assistance that could not be offloaded four days earlier. Once again, shelling occurred nearby, despite assurances having been provided by all parties. In those difficult circumstances, I commend the valiant humanitarian workers risking their lives to provide assistance and protection to people in need.

But we are obviously far from safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid, as demanded in resolution 2401 (2018), as well as other relevant Security Council resolutions. And so the humanitarian and human rights situation is becoming more desperate by the day. In Douma, relief workers who reached the city last week described conditions as shocking and overwhelming. People are sheltering in overcrowded basements. Access to food, water and sanitation is limited. In relation to Douma, we have a convoy ready that I hope will be allowed to proceed in the coming days, especially after the results of today's meeting.

As in all conflict settings, the specific needs of women are not receiving sufficient attention, including access to safe spaces, critical health services, medicine and baby formula for their children. In eastern Ghouta, health partners on the ground advise that more than 1,000 people are in urgent need of medical evacuation. The United Nations is ready to support these medical evacuations, in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other partners. A prioritized list of those in greatest need, mostly children, has been shared with the Syrian authorities. I urge a positive response, hoping that today's meeting will allow these actions to take place in the immediate future.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent has announced its intention to send a relief convoy to Afrin as soon as security conditions allows. A United Nations humanitarian mission is awaiting Government authorization to immediately deploy to Raqqa for assessments of security and needs. There are also new disturbing allegations of the use of chlorine gas. Even if we cannot verify them, we cannot ignore them. I continue to urge the Council to find unity on this issue.

Having said what I said, I believe that despite all the difficulties, lack of trust, mutual suspicions and cold calculations, it should be possible to implement resolution 2401 (2018). It should be possible to have a cessation of hostilities. It should be possible to deliver aid. It should be possible to evacuate the sick and wounded. It should be possible to lift the sieges. It should be possible to accelerate humanitarian mine action throughout Syria. It should also be possible to remove Security Council-listed terrorist fighters from conflict zones without massive and indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure.

We cannot give up, for the sake of the Syrian people. I appeal to all parties to ensure the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) throughout the whole of Syrian territory. The United Nations is ready to assist in any effort to make that happen. I call on all States with influence to exercise it in support of the efforts of the United Nations and the implementation of the resolution. I hope that this week's Astana ministerial meeting, which will gather the guarantors of de-escalation, will concretely restore de-escalation arrangements, and take real steps on detainees, abductees and missing persons. The dramatic situation I have described — the calamity across the country, the rivalries, the cynicism, the cruelty — highlight the need for a political solution. My Special Envoy continues to work towards the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

On Thursday, the conflict will enter its eighth year. I refuse to lose my hope to see Syria rising from the ashes. To see a united, democratic Syria able to avoid fragmentation and sectarianism and with its sovereignty and territorial integrity respected, and to see a Syrian people able to freely decide their future and choose their political leadership.

The President: I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

I now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Recalling the Security Council's latest note 507 on its working methods (S/2017/507), I wish to encourage all participants, both members and non-members of the Council, to deliver their statements in five minutes or less.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): I deliver this speech today on behalf of Kuwait and Sweden.

At the outset I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting at the request of the delegations of Kuwait and Sweden, pursuant to resolution 2401 (2018). I also thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his presence here today and for his briefing about the implementation of this resolution.

Fifteen days have passed since the Security Council's unanimous adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), which demands that all parties implement a 30-day ceasefire throughout Syria without delay in order to deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need and to end the siege of residential areas. It is with great regret that we continue to witness a clear failure to implement the resolution's provisions while military operations across Syria continue to prevent humanitarian and medical assistance, particularly in eastern Ghouta and specifically on the part of the Syrian authorities. This has prevented United Nations teams and their humanitarian partners from safely providing humanitarian assistance to eastern Ghouta, which has been a primary locus among Syrian areas in need of assistance ever since its siege began in 2013, and which is home to about 400,000 people. In this regard, we would like to make a number of observations, as follows.

First, we have followed with deep concern the inability of the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to enter the besieged areas, and the obstacles and impediments that they have faced during their operations in some areas. In that regard, we would refer to events in Douma, eastern Ghouta, on 5 March, which proved to be the deadliest day since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), with at least 100 people having been killed on that day alone. On that day, the hopes of civilians hinged on receiving lifesaving humanitarian aid, and we looked forward to that first positive initiative reaching 90,000 people in need of assistance in eastern Ghouta.

However, what happened was that the number of beneficiaries dropped to less than half due to the Syrian authorities having removed necessary medical supplies from the convoy's load without clear justification, despite the fact that they had been given prior notification, based on standard operating procedures, of the entirety of the humanitarian convoy's content. It is also a matter of deep concern that convoys administered by the United Nations and its partners were compelled to cease their operations before completely unloading their cargo due to continued aerial bombardment on Douma. We demand that the Syrian authorities give immediate permission for two convoys per week to eastern Ghouta and other destinations, at the request of the United Nations. We call on all parties to provide appropriate security guarantees for these convoys and to permit United Nations staff to accompany the convoys.

In this regard, we reaffirm the need for all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, to assume their responsibilities to protect all humanitarian workers, including United Nations agencies and their relevant partners. We welcome the entry of the remaining humanitarian convoys provided by the Red Cross and the World Food Program into Douma on 9 March to deliver the remaining food assistance. This was the second time such convoys had been allowed to enter Douma in one week. There is a need to build on this so as to increase the number of weekly convoys to eastern Ghouta in a sustainable manner.

Secondly, we reiterate the Council's demand for immediate unconditional medical evacuations based on medical need, starting this week, and we call on the Syrian authorities to give permission and work with the United Nations and its implementing partners to that end.

Thirdly, the continued fighting in eastern Ghouta, particularly the incessant air strikes, prompts us to again call specifically on the Syrian authorities to comply with the provisions of the resolution and of international law in order to facilitate humanitarian assistance to reach those in need. We believe that a daily five-hour truce in eastern Ghouta does not support the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

Fourthly, the United Nations has confirmed that the number of combatants associated with terrorist groups designated by the Security Council in eastern Ghouta does not exceed 350. We cannot accept continued military operations under the pretext of combating terrorism when they effectively prevent the delivery of humanitarian assistance, contrary to the requirements of the resolution. Resolution 2401 (2018), which was adopted unanimously, took effect immediately and is applicable to all parties. In that regard, we note the willingness of certain opposition groups in eastern Ghouta to abide by the provisions of the resolution and to expel terrorist groups designated by the Security Council. We express our support for the

efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to operationalize this matter without delay.

Fifthly, listening to the Secretary-General's briefing today on the status of the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) constitutes one of the monitoring tools included in the resolution. But the main mechanisms remain the existing ceasefire agreements between the parties to the conflict, most notably the Astana accord with Russia, Turkey and Iran as its guarantors, and the agreement supervised by the United States and the Russian Federation that emanated from the International Syria Support Group. The resolution stresses the need to activate those agreements in order to reach a 30-day ceasefire aimed at allowing sustainable access to humanitarian assistance in all regions in Syria. We call again on the parties to those agreements to redouble their efforts in order to implement the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018).

The unanimous position that the Security Council conveyed to the Syrian people and to the world by adopting resolution 2401 (2018) on 24 February must be built on in a speedy and effective manner, especially as the resolution is primarily of a humanitarian nature. There is a collective responsibility on us as members of the Security Council, specifically on influential parties, to maintain our credibility before the world and work to implement the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018). We would like here to stress that the provisions of the resolution are valid even after 30 days from the date of its adoption.

We affirm our full commitment to continue to closely follow the status of the implementation of the resolution in the Council monthly reports. We will spare no effort to make progress on its implementation. This month marks the beginning of the eighth year of the conflict in Syria. Sadly, there is still a need for the violence to cease, for sustained humanitarian access through weekly cross-line convoys, for medical evacuations, for the protection of civilians and hospitals and for lifting the siege. We cannot let the Syrian people down, and we will continue to strive to implement the joint demands that we have set out.

Finally, we recall that the lack of a political settlement to the conflict in Syria based on resolution 2254 (2015) will lead to further deterioration of the humanitarian situation.

Mrs. Haley (United States of America): I would like to congratulate the Netherlands and your team, Mr. President, on having assumed the presidency of the Security Council for this month. I also want to thank Secretary-General Guterres for his briefing and for all of his efforts on behalf of peace in Syria

Sixteen days ago, we sat around the negotiating table with our Security Council colleagues and agreed to a 30-day ceasefire in the brutal bombardment of civilians in Syria. The negotiations were long and difficult. Every minute we delayed meant more innocent people were killed. But the Russian delegation stalled and drew out the talks. They had conditions they insisted on before they would allow the killing to stop. The United States was reluctant to accept those conditions. But, in order to stop the killing in Syria, we accepted them. We attempted to work with Russia in good faith to end the violence in Syria.

As a result, 16 days ago we came to an agreement. Russia cast its vote in favour of the agreement (see S/PV.8188). With that vote Russia promised its support for a 30-day cease-fire, as did the rest of the members of the security Council. With that vote Russia said that it too wanted to create the conditions for food and medicine to reach starving Syrian families. With that vote Russia told us it would use its influence with the Syrian regime to silence the guns in Syria. It told us that the Russians would themselves honour the ceasefire they voted to demand. With that vote Russia made a commitment to us, to the Syrian people and to the world — a commitment to stop the killing in Syria.

Today we know that the Russians did not keep their commitment. Today we see their actions do not match those commitments, as bombs continue dropping on the children of eastern Ghouta. Today we must ask whether Russia can no longer influence the Al-Assad regime to stop the horrific destruction of hospitals, medical clinics and ambulances and to stop dropping chemical weapons on villages. Has the situation in Syria reversed, and Russia is now the tool of Al-Assad — or worse, Iran?

We must ask those questions because we know the Russians themselves have continued their own bombing. In the first four days following the ceasefire, Russian military aircraft conducted at least 20 daily bombing missions in Damascus and eastern Ghouta. The Russians negotiated the wording of the ceasefire down to the commas and the periods. They voted for the

ceasefire. And they immediately disregarded it. In the past 16 days, over 500 civilians have died. Some reports put the death toll even higher. That is unacceptable.

Thousands of Syrians are in desperate need of medical care. But none of the United Nations list has been evacuated. We have heard the conversations are ongoing with the regime to medically evacuate 25 people in the coming weeks. While those civilians should be rushed to medical care, we ask why it took so long. When will the more than 1,000 identified medical cases be evacuated? There have been almost no deliveries of medicine or surgical equipment, because the Al-Assad regime remove them from the United Nations humanitarian convoys.

The convoy that made it to eastern Ghouta on 5 March had to navigate around constant regime airstrikes. The bombing was so severe that the United Nations could barely unload the food the trucks were carrying. And in the past 16 days, there have been three separate allegations of chlorine-gas attacks. This is no ceasefire. This is the Al-Assad regime, Iran and Russia continuing to wage war against their political opponents.

And there is another reason we know the Syrians and Russians never intended to implement the ceasefire: they planned for it. Over the past two weeks, the Russian and Syrian regimes have been busy labelling every opposition group in eastern Ghouta a "terrorist group". Why? So they can exploit a provision in the ceasefire resolution (resolution 2401 (2018)) that allows for military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Al-Qaida. There are terrorists in Syria, but the Russian and Syrian regimes label anyone as terrorists who resist their absolute control.

In the eyes of Russia, Iran and Al-Assad, the neighbourhoods of eastern Ghouta are full of terrorists. The hospitals are full of terrorists. The schools are full of terrorists. The Syrian and Russian regimes insist that they are targeting terrorists, but their bombs and artillery continue to fall on hospitals and schools and on innocent civilians. They have deliberately and with premeditation exploited a loophole they negotiated in the ceasefire to continue starving and pummelling hundreds of thousands of innocent Syrian civilians. They have made a mockery of this process and this institution. For the sake of the Syrian people and the integrity of the Council, we must respond and take action.

During the negotiations, the United States put all parties on notice that we needed to act if the ceasefire was not honoured. Members of the Security Council agreed. Now that day has come. The ceasefire has failed. The situation of the civilians in eastern Ghouta is dire. The United States is acting. We have drafted a new ceasefire draft resolution that provides no room for evasion. It is simple, straightforward and binding. It will take effect immediately upon adoption by the Council. It contains no counter-terrorism loopholes for Al-Assad, Iran and the Russians to hide behind. And it focuses on the area the Secretary-General has identified and that the world can see holds the greatest urgency for the lives of innocent civilians, that is, Damascus city and eastern Ghouta.

If Russia, Iran and Al-Assad cannot agree to stop the bombing in that limited part of Syria for that limited amount of time, they will not agree to anything that is worthwhile. If they will not keep their word once they have agreed to a ceasefire, then how can we trust them? In the end, that is what makes the work of the Council possible: trust. If we cannot count on the members of the Council to honour their agreements, we cannot accomplish anything. If we cannot act when children are dying, we have no business being here. If we cannot save families that have not seen the sun for weeks because they have been hiding underground to escape barrel bombs, then the Security Council is as impotent as its worst critics say it is.

Almost a year ago in the aftermath of the Syrian regime sarin gas attack on Khan Shaykhoun, the United States offered a warning to the Council. We said that when the international community consistently fails to act, there are times when States are compelled to take their own action. The Security Council failed to act, and the United States successfully struck the air base from which Al-Assad had launched his chemical attack. We repeat that warning today.

We welcome all nations that will work together to finally provide relief for the Syrian people, and we support the United Nations political process that seeks to end the war in Syria. However, we also warn that any nation that is determined to impose its will through chemical attacks and inflicting human suffering, most especially the outlaw Syrian regime, the United States remains prepared to act if we must. It is not the path we prefer, but it is a path we have demonstrated we will take. We are prepared to take it again.

Mr. Allen (United Kingdom): I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing and, through him, may I thank all of those trying to supply the desperately needed humanitarian response on the ground. They are indeed valiant.

Sixteen days ago, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2401 (2018). We did so because we and the world were sickened by the slaughter of innocents in Syria, particularly in eastern Ghouta. Russia used every tactic in its playbook to weaken the resolution and buy time for its ally, the Al-Assad regime, to bomb indiscriminately. But when it raises its hand in support, we hope that Russia and its clients would keep their word and implement the resolution.

Sadly, as the Secretary-General's briefing has made clear, our resolution has not been implemented. What has happened? First, has there been a ceasefire? No. The violence continues and civilian deaths continue to rise. In those 16 days, 607 people have reportedly been killed, including 99 children and 79 women. The opposition armed groups committed to implementing resolution 2401 (2018) in full, but the Al-Assad regime's air strikes continue.

Despite voting for a ceasefire, between 24 and 28 February, Russian military aircraft conducted 20 bombing missions in eastern Ghouta and Damascus every day. Russia has failed to confirm that it is only conducting air strikes against groups that are listed as terrorist groups by the Council. During the so-called daily humanitarian pause, over 56 air strikes hit eastern Ghouta between 27 February and 7 March, including at least six air strikes by Russian aircraft, according to monitors on the ground.

Let us recall that only last year Russia declared the whole area to be a de-escalation zone. It has claimed that its bombardments are about fighting terrorists. That is manifestly not the case. There is one terrorist group recognized by the Security Council in eastern Ghouta, which accounts for less than not even 1 per cent of the population of the enclave. The other fighters are members of the opposition armed groups, which Russia has itself invited to the Astana meetings. Those groups have written stating their readiness to expel Al-Nusra Front from the enclave. Instead, Russia bombs them, undermining the political process that it is a part of. We are pleased that the members of the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian opposition will be able to discuss the situation in Syria with Council members later today. I repeat my consistent condemnation of attacks against Damascus.

What about our resolution's second demand, that is, safe, unimpeded and sustained access for humanitarian convoys, including medical and surgical supplies? Only one convoy has been able to enter besieged eastern Ghouta in the past 16 days, in two movements following shelling. They delivered supplies for 27,500 people — a fraction of the 400,000 civilians besieged in eastern Ghouta.

What is stopping the aid from getting to the people that so desperately need it? Again, it is the regime. The ongoing violence that it perpetrates is an important factor, and its failure to grant access is another. On 5 March, the regime removed nearly 70 per cent of the medical supplies from a humanitarian convoy destined for 90,000 people. That happened at a time when the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is warning that malnutrition and disease are so prevalent that people will soon die from hunger and sickness even more than from air strikes. Finally, have there been any medical evacuations for the approximately 1,000 people who need them? Not a single one. Again, it is the regime that will not permit its civilians to reach urgently needed medical care.

Some may point to an aid convoy or an announced pause in air strikes as a sign of improvement, and claim that those actions implement the resolution. They do not. Our resolution was clear: a ceasefire without delay, humanitarian access and medical evacuations. None have happened. Instead, the truth is that the regime will continue to pound eastern Ghouta until it has a complete military victory there, and Russia will continue to protect its ally, whatever the cost to the people of Syria and its own reputation.

As we sit here, watching Al-Assad inscribing eastern Ghouta, again, on the roll call of atrocities and war crimes that he has committed over the eight years of the bloody conflict, let me say clearly that there will be future accountability for those crimes, and Russia's role, bombing alongside him and protecting him from accountability, will never be forgotten. There is still time. If Russia is able to announce a five-hour ceasefire, it can announce a full ceasefire. If it can get one aid convoy through, it can get more through. I urge Russia to give its unconditional support to resolution 2401 (2018) and a ceasefire to enable the delivery of humanitarian

assistance, respect international humanitarian law and protect civilians.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I would first like to thank the Secretary-General for his strong and particularly enlightening briefing, as well as for his personal commitment, in addition to that of the staff of the Secretariat and Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to spare no effort in implementing resolution 2401 (2018). Allow me, on behalf of France, to especially commend the United Nations teams and all the humanitarian actors working under extremely difficult conditions in Syria.

Two weeks ago, we unanimously adopted a text calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities of at least 30 days, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access and medical evacuations in Syria. I would remind those present that those demands apply to the whole of Syria and all parties. We negotiated the text together for several weeks and, I repeat, unanimously adopted it. Each member of the Council around this table has therefore endorsed the content by deciding to assume responsibility. That responsibility fell particularly on Russia, as a permanent member that voted for resolution 2401 (2018), sponsor of the Astana talks and a Power engaged in the Syrian situation, as it claims to be.

We had agreed to a clause to meet 15 days later to review its implementation. The Secretary-General has just provided us with a very clear picture of that. Since 24 February, civilian casualties have continued to climb into the hundreds every week. The regime is pursuing, in defiance of its people and the Council, an air and land offensive that it has never intended to halt, with the support of Russia and Iran. However, let us not be deceived that civilians are not the "collateral victims" of those military operations. Rather, they are themselves being targeted by the regime, deliberately and methodically to starve and rape, destroy their health centres, kill and sow terror and death. The hell on Earth experienced by eastern Ghouta is not just the effect of the regime's policy; it is the very purpose of the regime's murderous madness, with its daily tally of war crimes and crimes against humanity, for which the regime will have to answer.

Let us call a spade a spade: Who can stop the Syrian regime? Everyone knows that, apart from a military operation, it is Russia that is in the best position to do so today. It is therefore legitimate that today, more than ever before, everyone looks expectantly towards Russia, which has so far been unwilling, or unable, to exert sufficient pressure on the regime.

Two weeks after the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), we are here in the Chamber to face the facts. First, what has happened since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018)? In the light of the inexorable worsening of the humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta, the Security Council has rallied around a cessation of hostilities and made every effort to seek consensus, and finally did reach consensus on 24 February. We knew then, and we said so, that this result was only a precondition, and that the longest and most difficult part of the path towards a humanitarian truce was still before us. However, every day since 24 February the fighting has continued. In the days that followed, despite Russia's unilateral announcement of a daily five-hour truce — well below what resolution 2401 (2018) requires — the intensity of the fighting has increased. Since resolution 2401 (2018) was adopted, there has not been a single day when eastern Ghouta, an enclave that has been starved and besieged for months, has not been bombed by the regime and its supporters. The fight against terrorism — and this cannot be repeated enough — cannot be used as a pretext for such a bloodbath of civilians or for such contempt for international humanitarian law.

Eastern Ghouta is now a textbook case of war crimes, and even of crimes against humanity. It cannot be ignored: the Syrian regime, with the support of Russia and Iran, is engaged in a war of total submission against its people. Violations of the ceasefire by the Damascus regime, with the support of Russia and Iran, have been massive and ongoing, and I would like to thank the Secretary-General for clearly exposing those violations. Let me briefly review some of these violations.

Between 24 and 27 February, 72 attacks by the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies, from more than 14 locations, were reported. Between 24 and 28 February, Russian military aircraft carried out no fewer than 20 bombing missions in Damascus and eastern Ghouta. Between 27 February and 2 March, field observers documented at least 25 air strikes by the regime and Russia during the five-hour humanitarian breaks declared by Moscow. Since 18 February, more than 29 hospital have been hit, and few health facilities are still in operation. On 8 March, a health care facility in Mesraba was completely destroyed by bombardments. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, as of 11 March, 607 people, including 99 children and 79 women, had been killed since the adoption of resolution

2401 (2018). I would repeat: 607 people have been killed. In addition to the dead, there are many injured persons, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, rapes and many other intolerable violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Finally, further credible allegations of the use of chemical weapons have been made since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018). As the highest French authorities have pointed out, France will brook no compromise when it comes to the use of those abject weapons.

The humanitarian needs are immense, yet the regime deliberately continues to block the entry of aid, despite the presence of Russian soldiers at the crossing points, as what happened to the convoy on 5 March shows. Indeed, the population continues to be deprived of relief and of any possibility of medical evacuation, even if more than 1,000 people need it.

Still, we cannot give up. On behalf of France, I would like to make a new and urgent appeal to those who can make a difference on the ground, starting with Russia. France is not posing; it is taking action. My country has been and remains one of the countries most committed to the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). Right after the resolution's adoption, France stepped up its contacts and efforts at the highest level so as to contribute to the resolution's swift implementation, so that the Astana guarantors would assume their responsibilities and so that the commitments made collectively would be respected. President Macron has met with Presidents Putin, Erdoğan and Rouhani, as well as with the Secretary-General on several occasions. Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visited Moscow and then Tehran. To Russia, we proposed concrete measures for implementing resolution 2401 (2018).

Although our efforts aimed at reaching out have been ignored, we stand by our proposals. Let us not deceive ourselves: without an immediate implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), the worst is yet to come. After the regime has conquered the rural zones of eastern Ghouta, the worst would be a conquest — street by street, house by house — in a torrent of fire, for the urban zones of the region, which are by definition the most densely populated areas. It is of the highest urgency, therefore, for us to come together to ensure that the resolution is fully implemented before the street battles promised by the regime's military planners begin. I would like to highlight three essential elements in that regard.

The first is implementing a monitoring system to ensure maximum pressure on the parties. The main reason resolution 2401 (2018) has not been not implemented is that the Syrian regime has been engaged in its murderous folly and the regime's supporters have been unable or unwilling to stop it and prevent a worsening of the humanitarian situation. But the failure to implement resolution 2401 (2018) is also the result of our not being able to put in place a sufficiently targeted follow-up mechanism to the resolution in the Council. This must be our priority, and I am convinced that it is our only chance to compel the Syrian regime to comply with its international obligations. France therefore calls for appropriate decisions to be taken in the coming days.

It is essential and urgent that humanitarian convoys reach eastern Ghouta in adequate security conditions and carry out their delivery of aid, and that medical evacuations be allowed. For that to happen, the truce must be sustainable and flexible in order to take into account delays in the delivery, discharge and distribution of aid. Medical authorizations must not only be delivered in an expedited manner; they must also come with all the security guarantees needed by patients, their families and the humanitarian actors who assist them. Indeed, the protection due them under international humanitarian law must be unconditionally guaranteed.

The second element I would like to highlight is the departure of terrorist fighters from Ghouta as proposed by armed groups. In their letter to the Security Council, the three armed groups in eastern Ghouta, upon the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), indicated their commitment to upholding the resolution, made concrete proposals for a comprehensive cessation of hostilities and committed themselves to taking combatant members of their groups out of Ghouta. The United Nations offered its assistance in those exchanges and carried out important work along those lines, to which the Secretary General just referred. I call on Russia today to conclude and implement the relevant agreements without delay. This is one of the keys to implementing the resolution.

The third element is political negotiation. A lasting cessation of hostilities in Syria requires a political process consistent with the terms of resolution 2254 (2015), our shared road map for ending the conflict. Staffan de Mistura has our full support in bringing this mission to a successful conclusion and swiftly convening negotiations in Geneva, which is the only legitimate forum for a credible solution. In order to

achieve results, United Nations mediation requires that necessary pressure be exerted on the parties. We therefore call once again on Russia, as well as Iran, to fulfil their responsibilities, as we are fulfilling our own.

Collectively we have the capacity, if we so wish, to stop the endless descent into the abyss that characterizes the Syrian tragedy, and finally create a real political dynamic. On behalf of France, I therefore call once again for all members of the Council to finally rally their words and action in the service of this shared objective, which matches to our interests and responsibilities. It is never too late to save lives, and it is our responsibility — if we accept it — to end the tragedy of Syria, on which our generation, and the credibility of the Security Council, will be judged.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing and his detailed information on what we asked for. We particularly appreciated his words when he said that there should be only one agenda for all of us — ending this crisis.

Russia supported the Security Council's adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), guided by the priority of improving the humanitarian situation in various parts of Syria. We not only believe that its effective implementation is extremely important, we have also proposed concrete ways of achieving that, something that was discussed in today's briefing. And that is unlike various capitals whose representatives have settled comfortably for doing nothing while vilifying the Syrian regime, as they call it, and making endless accusations about Russia. In out last meeting on the subject (see S/PV.8188), I promised to count the number of times that Ambassador Haley mentioned Russia in the next meeting. The answer is 22. France came second, with 16 mentions, and the United Kingdom was third, with 12. This matters not just for the record but for the context in which it occurs. What is going on is a political policy, and it does not have to do merely — indeed, not much at all — with concern for Syrians' humanitarian needs.

It is important that everyone understands that resolution 2401 (2018) is not about an immediate ceasefire, which is a utopian notion, but a preliminary agreement between the parties as a condition for achieving sustainable de-escalation in all the contested areas of Syria, not just eastern Ghouta. That is the only realistic way. The resolution contains an unequivocal demand in that regard, and we are trying to make that happen. The Council has heard about that today and will hear more.

The authorities in Damascus have expressed their satisfaction with the resolution and their willingness to implement its provisions. However, they have also rightly demanded an immediate cessation of attacks on the capital and of all infringements on Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The counter-terrorist operation that the Syrian armed forces are conducting does not contradict resolution 2401 (2018). The Government of Syria has every right to work to end threats to its citizens' security. The Damascus suburbs cannot continue to be a breeding ground for terrorists. It is the terrorists' persistent attempts to disrupt the ceasefire that serve to maintain the tensions in Syria, and of course the most problematic area is in eastern Ghouta.

The July 2017 Cairo agreements on the eastern Ghouta de-escalation zone gave the militants a chance to be included in the political settlement. They did not take advantage of it and have still not dissociated themselves from the terrorists. Even now the groups' activities are coordinated from the joint headquarters run by Jabhat Al-Nusra. We have reliable information that they are in active radio contact, discussing plans for shelling the humanitarian corridors, among other things. Why are they only now talking about being willing to drive Al-Nusra's members out of eastern Ghouta? And why are we the only ones asking that question? We have answered it a number of times ourselves when we have spoken about suspicions that Al-Nusra is being preserved for particular political purposes, in this case to maintain a dangerous hotbed of armed resistance in the immediate vicinity of Syria's capital.

Even now they continue to lull us with fairy stories about how few terrorists there are in eastern Ghouta. And who is going to monitor the armed groups' implementation of the resolution? Who will be responsible for that? Just please do not keep saying the so-called regime, and Russia, and Iran. Such ideological attitudes are simply not serious in the context of the professional discussions that we conduct in the Security Council. What responsibility will the members of the Council take for the implementation of the resolution? How will they implement it? How will they influence the militias they support?

Following the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), with Russia's participation, daily five-hour humanitarian pauses were established and the Muhayam-Al-Wafedin checkpoint was opened for use by both civilians and militants with families. They were guaranteed security, transportation and protection along the entire route. The Syrian authorities then opened another checkpoint, Jisreen-Mleha, in the southern area of eastern Ghouta. Medical posts have been set up, distribution points organized for hot meals, buses are standing by. However, the insurgents continued to subject the central areas of Damascus and its outskirts to massive shelling. Dozens of mines have been laid for days, resulting in deaths and injuries as well as major damage. Since the day the resolution was adopted more than 100 people have died, and many more been injured, as a result of the shelling in the capital. The Tishrin and Al-Biruni hospitals and a medical centre in Al-Rihan have been hit more than once. These are real hospitals, not the militants' field offices that are frequently disguised as hospitals. They are making active use of snipers. We know this for a fact.

It is a tragedy when any civilians die during an armed conflict. But my delegation has always been interested in the origin of the statistical information being used in the United Nations. In a highly politicized situation this subject is extremely important. Frequent assessments are pronounced about civilian losses in eastern Ghouta. We hope that future reports will be required to indicate where their data is from, how reliable it is and who exactly is meant by "reliable sources on the ground".

Every day that has passed, the extremists have forbidden civilians to leave the areas they have blocked and have severely suppressed attempts to resist arbitrary action, including through exemplary executions. We have reliable information about that too. Strikes on corridors and exit checkpoints are constant, including during the humanitarian pauses. On 9 March a convoy of refugees was shelled, once again disrupting an evacuation. Tunnels are being used for attacks on the Syrian army, and the exits from underground installations are located in neighbourhoods where there are public institutions, mainly mosques, hospitals and markets. They have inflated food prices and at the same time have been taking away the people's food, water, medicines and mobile phones. They are setting up firing positions in residential buildings and using people as human shields. They are laying mines in neighbourhoods that are adjacent to the line of contact. They are conducting searches and confiscating permit papers distributed by Government forces.

The residents are trying to resist this repression, organizing spontaneous rallies and clashing with the militias. On 1 March, in north-eastern Douma, Al-Nusra terrorists shot four people who participated in such a demonstration. Today there was a major protest in Kafr Batna. The first major exodus of civilians took place on the night of 11 March, when 52 people, 26 of them children, left the village of Misraba with the assistance of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and the Syrian army.

There are also militants who want to leave eastern Ghouta, but their field commanders threaten potential defectors with reprisals. For the first time, on 9 March, after long and tense negotiations, with the participation of officers from the Russian Centre for Reconciliation, 13 militants were evacuated from the enclave through the humanitarian corridor at their own request. Talks have been held with Jaysh Al-Islam on reaching an agreement on the withdrawal of a second group of fighters. A meeting was also held with the leaders of Faylaq Al-Rahman, at which it was demanded that they dissociate themselves from Jabhat Al-Nusra immediately. However, according to information received, the militants of the group decided to continue their armed resistance, forcibly recruiting ordinary citizens into their ranks.

To turn to the subject of the humanitarian convoy entering Douma on 5 March, the convoy received comprehensive support from the Syrian Government and the Russian military. A humanitarian corridor was established, security ensured for its passage and the situation was monitored. However, there was a great deal of evidence of disorganized activity on the part of the humanitarian actors. According to our information, United Nations staff needlessly delayed the convoy operations, creating real security risks. While the convoy was being put together, they attempted to load it with undeclared medical supplies — and the fact that not all of them were declared was mentioned today — and wasted around two hours in a meeting with the leaders of the so-called local councils. They spread unreliable information about aerial strikes in the trucks' unloading area, and today some delegations seized on that joyfully, although what actually occurred was one instance of mortar fire from the armed groups' positions. They did not respond to local residents'

request to help them leave the enclave. Nonetheless, 13 people, five of them children, were evacuated.

Afterwards, it was curious to read a report that one of Ahrar Al-Sham's field commanders had, in a tone of irony, expressed his appreciation for the humanitarian pause on 5 March, which enabled the militias to regroup, recover their strength and a number of lost positions and prepare ambushes for the Syrian military.

A 9 March action was successfully carried out with the Russian military providing a truck convoy with safe conduct.

However, the scope of resolution 2401 (2018) is not limited to eastern Ghouta. We should note that in the past two weeks, the terrorists of Al-Nusra and associated militia groups have repeatedly shelled villages in Hamah province. As a result of new strikes there are been deaths and injuries in blockaded Fo'ah and Kafraya in Idlib. Armed clashes between illegal groups in that province have led to threats of a number of medical facilities being closed. Al-Nusra has become more active in the southern de-escalation zone, which could be related to the fact that they continue to be supplied with weapons from outside. The situation in Afrin remains very difficult.

The Syrian authorities have given permission for humanitarian aid to be delivered to the residents of Rukban camp, in the area illegally held by the Americans around the Al-Tanf military base. We would like to know what the United Nations is doing about that. Needless to say, we assume that the distribution of humanitarian assistance will be undertaken by a trustworthy entity such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. We are also awaiting the speedy dispatch of a United Nations humanitarian needs assessment mission to Raqqa, which was bombed out by the coalition. There should be no pointless delays with this, so I would like to ask the United Nations when that mission will take place.

We understand very well the unspoken motives for the current disinformation campaign, whose aim is to create a public perception that the Syrian authorities use toxic substances. In fact, both we and the Syrians have well-founded fears that provocations are being planned with the aim of accusing the Syrian authorities of carrying out chemical attacks. According to information received, Al-Nusra used a chlorine-based substance in eastern Ghouta on 5 March, affecting more than 30 local residents. This is all being done in order to prepare the ground for unilateral acts of force against sovereign Syria. We heard hints of that in the statements made by some delegations today. Essentially, steps are being considered that could deliver yet another heavy blow to regional stability. Meanwhile, on territory formerly controlled by illegal armed groups, there have been more new discoveries of stores of chemicals, but the relevant bodies of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have been very slow to react to the appeals of the Syrian authorities.

Russia will continue its efforts to implement resolution 2401 (2018), but we demand that some of our colleagues do their part and exert genuine pressure on the groups that they support or sponsor, instead of constantly calling on Russia and creating the false impression that the resolution applies only to us.

In conclusion, I would like to say that this afternoon four Security Council will be holding an unofficial Arria Formula meeting with the declared intention of making opposition voices heard on the humanitarian issue in Syria. This is going to be widely covered in the media. First and foremost, we want to point out the fact that is unacceptable to use United Nations resources for politicized purposes, and that is certainly not what Arria Formula meetings were conceived for. This event conceals the desire of its organizers to exert informational pressure on the Syrian Government and those who are helping it fight terrorism. In our view, to get the full picture, it would not be a bad idea to listen to the residents of Raqqa and Rukban camp, not to mention eastern Ghouta, where there are quite a few people who would be glad of the opportunity to appeal for their deliverance from the presence of extremists.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I should like at the outset to thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his briefing. China appreciates the positive efforts made by the United Nations and the Secretary-General to alleviate the humanitarian situation in the Syrian regions affected. China sympathizes with the suffering of the Syrian people and has consistently been working hard to help them. Last month we channelled assistance through the International Committee of the Red Cross, sending water, food, medical services and shelter to internally displaced persons in Syria.

We are extremely concerned at the fact that the people of Syria are suffering from the conflict. No act

of violence against innocent civilians can be tolerated. This situation must end.

On 24 February, the members of the Security Council, leaving aside their differences, unanimously adopted resolution 2401 (2018). This upheld the unity of the Council and provided a rare opportunity for a ceasefire, halting the violence and easing the suffering of the Syrian people. After the resolution was adopted, we saw that United Nations humanitarian relief convoys had overcome difficulties of all kinds and entered eastern Ghouta, delivering much-needed assistance to the people there.

With Russia announcing the implementation of the temporary ceasefire, a humanitarian corridor was opened for the Syrian people. We saw that some civilians, including children, had already entered the safe area through the humanitarian corridor and received relief and assistance. It has also come to our attention that the parties to the conflict continue to attack each other and that owing to the shelling the humanitarian corridor has not been able to serve its full purpose. We urge all parties concerned to make joint efforts, exert their influence and ensure that resolution 2401 (2018) is effectively and earnestly implemented. All members of the Security Council should maintain their unity and jointly stay on track to find a political solution to the Syrian issue, support the early resumption of the Geneva peace talks and urge all parties in Syria to achieve a solution acceptable to all as soon as possible, through a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, in order to ease the suffering of the Syrian people. China will continue to make unremitting efforts to that end.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): I join others in thanking Secretary-General António Guterres for his briefing.

We welcome the efforts of the United Nations, its system and the International Committee of the Red Cross to render immediate life-saving services, conduct hundreds of medical evacuations and send convoys to the besieged and hard-to-reach areas, especially eastern Ghouta, despite the potential danger to the lives of their personnel. We therefore urge the members of the Security Council to assist the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in operationalizing those emergency programmes and to ensure the protection of medical and humanitarian workers. Likewise, we also urge the parties to support United Nations structures in fulfilling their mandates.

We echo the United Nations calls to all parties to facilitate unconditional, unimpeded and sustained access to all people in need throughout the country and to take the necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and medical facilities, as required by international law and human rights standards.

Kazakhstan considers that it is equally important to further promote the Syrian settlement and believes that the Astana process has great potential for guiding intra-Syrian talks towards long-term peace. In that context, we propose that all sides, including stakeholders, provide all-round assistance, making use of the positive developments to improve the humanitarian situation on the ground.

Astana continues to support resolution 2254 (2015), as it always has, and repeatedly calls on the International Syria Support Group and other countries to help the conflicting parties to implement the measures stipulated in the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and the Vienna statements.

We express concern over the existing difficulties in Syria, which seriously impede the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), and we call on the international community to influence the conflicting parties to cooperate with the United Nations. The only way to truly resolve the crisis is through negotiations, predicated on mutual trust and understanding, together with confidence-building measures.

In practical terms, we are convinced that expelling terrorist groups from eastern Ghouta may calm the situation in that sector. Let us be frank: removing the Al-Nusra Front and other affiliated terrorist groups from the area, as stated in a letter from three parties, must be pursued in order to end hostilities. The implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) is a collective responsibility, with each Council member playing a significant role.

Finally, Kazakhstan supports solutions in Syria on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué, as well as the agreements on the de-escalation zones reached during the Astana process.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We would like to thank you, Mr. President, for having convened this meeting and to welcome the presence of Secretary-General António Guterres, who reminded us of the responsibilities of the international community,

in particular the Council, given the serious and terrible developments in Syria.

Peru follows with great concern the humanitarian situation in that country. We must express our sorrow and solidarity to the victims of the conflict, most of whom are children. We deeply regret that, two weeks after the ceasefire was unanimously adopted by the Council through resolution 2401 (2018), there has not been sufficient progress in its implementation. As the Secretary-General noted, a sustained cessation of hostilities has not materialized. The conflict continues to claim civilian victims. The much-needed humanitarian assistance has been provided in a very limited way. International law and international humanitarian law continue to be violated with impunity.

The bleak outlook requires us to redouble our efforts. The Security Council must remain united in its responsibility to protect the Syrian population by promoting all actions conducive to ensuring the full and immediate implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). The responsibility to act is clearly greater for the countries with the greatest capacity for influence in the field, in particular the guarantors of the de-escalation zones agreed in Astana.

The situation is particularly serious in eastern Ghouta, where, among other emergencies, more than 1,000 people need to be evacuated for medical reasons. It is also serious in Idlib, Afrin, Rukban and Raqqa, among other places. We need to remember that the ceasefire must cover the entire Syrian territory and allow humanitarian assistance in a sustained, safe and unhindered way.

The Syrian Government must comply with the ceasefire immediately and fulfil its responsibility to protect the population and its obligation to cooperate with the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). The fight against terrorism cannot be used as an excuse to violate human rights and international humanitarian law.

Peru supports the proposal of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to promote dialogue with the opposition groups that have expressed their willingness to comply with the ceasefire and to expel members of terrorist organizations linked to the Al-Nusra Front from eastern Ghouta.

Peru remains committed to achieving a political solution to the conflict that ends the ongoing humanitarian disaster, ensures accountability for the atrocious crimes committed in that country, including the use of chemical weapons, supports regional stability and achieves sustainable peace in Syria.

We would like to conclude by expressing our support for the Secretary-General in his call for the immediate implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) and for his tireless efforts and those of his team on the ground. We also wish to highlight the professionalism, the courage and the sense of duty of the United Nations humanitarian personnel and of the humanitarian agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, among others deployed in Syria.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to Secretary-General António Guterres for his informative briefing. I also thank him for his leadership and all his support, in particular his tremendous efforts, as well as those of his Special Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, and of the entire United Nations team, to achieve the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) and a definitive resolution of the Syrian conflict.

Today's meeting should be another milestone in the international response to the humanitarian crisis prevailing in Syria. However, unfortunately, that is not the case. As the Secretary-General underscored in his briefing, in recent weeks, the parties involved at all levels have intensified their fighting in eastern Ghouta despite the humanitarian ceasefire agreed through the unanimous adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) exactly 16 days ago.

Nevertheless, we welcome with satisfaction reports that the United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy was finally able to reach eastern Ghouta last Friday to complete the delivery of food that could not be unloaded on 5 March for security reasons. However, the delivery of all necessary humanitarian supplies, including the medical and health-care supplies that were seized in the first attempt by convoys to the besieged areas, continues to be urgent and must be carried out without delay.

We also welcome the news that the Secretary-General has just provided to us with regard to some improvements in the situation on the ground in eastern Ghouta. We hope that today's meeting will lead to greater improvement or a definitive resolution of the situation in that part of Syria.

We read the letter dated 9 March that the co-penholders — France, the United Kingdom and the United States — addressed to the Secretary-General and the Council. We have also read very carefully the many letters that the Syrian Government has addressed to the members of the Security Council through its Permanent Representative. Basically, we note in those letters the repeated mutual accusations that have been a characteristic of this long conflict since its beginning. We are talking about a 30-day ceasefire, and time is gradually running out. We have had enough of mutual recrimination. The only collective task that we should focus on is finding a coherent peace mechanism to stop this endless and heinous war.

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea remains deeply concerned about the developments in the situation in Syria. We reiterate the urgent need for Council members who have influence over the national parties to the conflict to redouble their diplomatic initiatives with a view to reaching a common understanding on how to find a political solution to the tragic crisis in Syria, the effects of which are a threat to the region and the international community, in particular because of the humanitarian implications posed by the millions of Syrians who are currently being displaced within the country or seeking asylum and because of the security risks caused by the expansion of Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist entities.

We also express our deep indignation at the continuing fighting in the province of Idlib, which, for seven consecutive days, has been subject to attacks and rocket fire from Islamic factions in areas of the cities of Kafraya and Fo'ah. Those events, like many others, demonstrate the need for a common front that will expel from Syria the Islamic State, Al-Qaida, the Al-Nusra Front and all other associated entities that threaten peace and security in the region.

In conclusion, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea calls on the guarantors of the Astana process — Russia, Iran and Turkey — to ensure that the rounds of negotiations to be held on 15 and 16 March — to which the Special Envoy of the United Nations for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, was invited — serve not only to plan future actions and strategies, but also to give genuine impetus to finding a solution to the Syrian crisis once and for all.

During my statement after the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), I said that we had partially spared ourselves from embarrassment (see S/PV.8188). However, since 16 days have passed since the adoption of the resolution without it being implemented, I think we remain completely shamed.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): Let me thank the Secretary-General for his comprehensive, but again very worrying and alarming, update.

Like many around this table, we share a sense of urgency, especially following the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018). We also see how difficult it is to implement resolution 2401 (2018) on the ground. Small steps, such as sending an aid convoy to eastern Ghouta last Monday, are still mere drops in the ocean of people's needs. Even with a unanimously adopted resolution, we are still lacking any substantial change on the ground and the fighting is far from being over. We therefore call for the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

We understand that the solution is not entirely in our hands, but still we should try to do our utmost to find possible ways to ensure that the life-saving aid convoys might reach those in need and medical evacuations might begin. Unfortunately, the situation in eastern Ghouta, but also in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, does not allow the suffering of ordinary Syrians to be alleviated.

Let me once again stress our full support for the Secretary-General, as well as his Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, in finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis. A political solution to the conflict remains the only viable way to end the suffering of Syrian people.

Let me also underline that the role of the Security Council remains crucial, but it is up to the Syrian people to decide their own future.

We agree that fighting against terrorist groups designated as such by the Security Council is crucial, but, at the same time, such designations cannot justify the attacks on innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure, including health facilities. Those attacks must stop and parties to the conflict must strictly comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. In that context, let me once again strongly underline that any response to violence should be proportionate.

We need full compliance with the ceasefire agreed in resolution 2401 (2018). The Russian proposal for a daily five-hour pause is simply not enough to allow humanitarian workers to deliver aid and to evacuate those who cannot be treated on the ground. The international community, and especially the Council,

bear a huge responsibility to protect civilians. Allow me to share a couple of concrete ideas, which I hope will be useful, on how to improve the situation on the ground.

As the Security Council, we should demand United Nations access in order to monitor designated de-escalation zones to ensure the well-being of civilians. All States Members of the United Nations should fully cooperate with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism set up last year and facilitate its work. Parties engaged in the conflict must cease enabling the crimes on the ground and withhold all their support to armed groups that target civilians. Parties conducting air strikes against terrorist groups must ensure that all necessary precautionary measures are taken into consideration in order to avoid civilian casualties and that all military operations are fully consistent with international law. All potential violations, including possible war crimes, must be investigated, and the perpetrators must be held accountable.

In conclusion, let me underline that, from our perspective, we in New York sometimes lack feedback on our actions. With regard to actions taken at Headquarters, it is for the Syrian people themselves to tell us what would be the most effective way to support them.

Mr. Tanoh-Boutchoue (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks the Secretary-General for his briefing on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Two weeks after its unanimous adoption by members of the Security Council, resolution 2401 (2018), which had inspired a great deal of hope, has not been implemented as planned, much to our regret. The requirement of an immediate cessation of hostilities for a period of at least 30 days, provided for by resolution 2401 (2018), to enable the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid and services and medical evacuation of the critically sick and wounded, in accordance with applicable international humanitarian law, has not yet gone into effect.

The humanitarian and security situation remains worrisome because it is impossible for humanitarian convoys that endure indiscriminate attacks and bombings perpetrated by various hostile groups to reach besieged areas. In addition, attacks are carried out against medical and humanitarian personnel and health-care infrastructure. According to the World Health Organization, such attacks are on the rise.

The deterioration of the humanitarian situation within Syria's borders due to increased fighting makes for dangerous living conditions for thousands of internally displaced persons and obliterates the hope of restoring security and dignity to millions of refugees in neighbouring countries living in extremely difficult conditions. Given the dire situation, Côte d'Ivoire hopes that the second international conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region, to be held in Brussels on 24 and 25 April at the initiative of the European Union, will result in pledges of increased humanitarian aid and development support.

In accordance with the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018), Côte d'Ivoire again calls for the immediate cessation of hostilities in order to enable the safe, sustained and unimpeded access of humanitarian convoys delivering basic necessities to hundreds of people in dire need in eastern Ghouta and other areas of the country. My delegation welcomes reports that, for a few days, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent was able once again to enter the city of Douma in eastern Ghouta to deliver the aid necessary, including food and non-food items. My delegation encourages all Syrian stakeholders to create conditions that would allow the United Nations to make scheduled deliveries in eastern Ghouta, throughout the entire country and on Syrian borders.

Côte d'Ivoire reiterates its belief that the humanitarian situation will not improve without significant progress on the political landscape because the two issues are inextricably linked. Therefore, it invites hostile groups and all stakeholders to engage in political dialogue in order to achieve a peaceful solution to the crisis in Syria. In that regard, it welcomes the holding of a meeting in Geneva between the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. De Mistura, and the three Astana guarantors — Iran, the Russian Federation and Turkey — with a view to relaunching the Syrian political process.

The delegation of Côte d'Ivoire hopes that the next meeting to be held in Astana, at the initiative of the three guarantors of the Astana process, will enable us to reach a lasting ceasefire in Syria and to calmly resume the intra-Syrian peace talks pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Llorentty Soliz (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation would like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

Once again we take this opportunity to pay tribute to humanitarian workers who risk their lives daily as they carry out their duties. We join other colleagues in congratulating the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, on his efforts to find a political solution to the serious situation in Syria, which, as the Secretary-General recalled, is in its eighth year.

Bolivia deplores the challenges to the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) that the Secretary-General outlined in his briefing today. We condemn all deliberate attacks on civilians and demand respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law. We call on the parties involved to focus primarily on protecting hospitals, medical facilities, schools and civilian residences, and the personnel of the various agencies and humanitarian assistance organizations whose employees put their own lives at risk as they carry out their work on the ground. We call on the parties to cooperate and enhance coordination efforts with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, provide unhindered humanitarian access and allow urgent medical evacuations to be carried out, in particular in besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

We call upon the parties to work together to achieve the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) throughout Syria as soon as possible and in accordance with agreements reached in the Astana process and on the de-escalation zones. We underscore the importance of unity within the Security Council when implementing resolution 2401 (2018). Such unity must be present if our goal is to fully implement it. We also call on the members of the Council and all parties involved to depoliticize the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and ensure that its actions are in line with international law.

We highlight a few forums for dialogue that could assist with reaching consensus on a definitive cessation of hostilities, such as the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi, whose outcome is geared towards strengthening the political process in Geneva. We hope that that forum will allow for the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) as soon as possible.

In conclusion, we reiterate that there is no military solution to the crisis. The only solution is through an inclusive political dialogue ordered and led by and for the Syrian people. We extend our best hopes for the outcome of the next meeting to be held in Astana.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): We thank the Secretary-General for his comprehensive, up-to-date and very useful briefing on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

Two weeks after the adoption of that resolution, the humanitarian situation in Syria continues to cause serious concern. The United Nations and its humanitarian partners have failed to ensure safe, sufficient, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access for populations in need of life-saving assistance due ongoing fighting, in particular in eastern Ghouta. Nonetheless, we are mindful of the fact that resolution 2401 (2018) applies to all parts of Syria. We note that the Secretary-General did not overlook that aspect of the resolution in his briefing.

We had all emphasized the importance of the effective implementation of the resolution in order to make positive changes on the ground and alleviate the humanitarian tragedy in Syria. Given the increasingly complex situation on the ground, we knew that it would not be an easy task. After the Council adopted resolution 2401 (2018), we recognized that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners could deliver aid to eastern Ghouta and other affected areas. No doubt, there remain serious challenges to ensuring the full implementation of the resolution.

Although it demands the cessation of hostilities without delay for at least 30 consecutive days throughout Syria, with the immediate engagement of all parties to ensure safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and medical evacuations, there have been ongoing military activities resulting in civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian facilities. Here, one should also not overlook the damage being caused by the shelling of Damascus.

Therefore, it is clear that much more remains to be done and all parties should be committed to the full implementation of the resolution. As the United Nations and its humanitarian partners are ready to deliver more aid to all Syrians throughout the country, it is absolutely critical that all the parties provide them safe, unfettered and sustained humanitarian access. In that regard, all those who have influence over the parties

should exert the necessary pressure to contribute to saving lives. It is also imperative to use all existing arrangements to facilitate the implementation of the resolution, particularly the cessation of hostilities. In that connection, we look forward to the Astana meeting, scheduled to take place on 15 and 16 March, which we hope will contribute to the full implementation of the resolution.

Finally, as the Secretary-General stated, we are entering into the eighth year since the start of the Syrian crisis. While we look forward to seeing the Syrian people, as a sovereign State, find a comprehensive political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015), the Council also has a responsibility and an indispensable role in resolving the Syrian crisis. Therefore, we hope that the spirit of cooperation and consensus that the Council demonstrated during the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) will be sustained not only to respond to the humanitarian tragedy, but also to ensure progress in the political track with a view to finding a lasting solution to the crisis. Most importantly, the cooperation of relevant countries that have influence is key. Without those countries, there will be no solution in sight.

The President: I will now make a statement in my capacity as representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

I would like to thank Secretary-General Guterres for his briefing. Through him, I would also like to thank all United Nations and other humanitarian personnel on the ground. They work under extreme circumstances.

Sixteen days ago (see S/PV.8188), the Security Council showed a rare example of unity regarding Syria when it adopted resolution 2401 (2018). I recall the glimmer of hope that day in the Chamber. All of us agreed that all parties to the Syrian conflict must cease hostilities in order to enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of the critically sick and wounded. Yet one day after the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), the Syrian regime, supported by Russia and Iran, launched a most violent ground offensive to conquer the enclave of eastern Ghouta. That offensive came on top of a relentless air campaign that had started one month ago. Resolution 2401 (2018) calls for a cessation of hostilities, without delay. Unfortunately, it is the military offensive that continues without delay.

Elsewhere in Syria, including in Idlib and Afrin, violence continues to threaten the civilian population as well. The Council must do everything in its power to advance the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). In that regard, I would like to stress the importance of humanitarian aid, the monitoring of the cessation of hostilities and accountability.

With regard to my first point, the immediate delivery of humanitarian aid, last week we were deeply shocked to hear reports that medical supplies, including surgical supplies, insulin and even trauma kits, had been removed from convoys by the Syrian regime. Medical supplies save lives and provide relief to the inhumane suffering that too many Syrians are going through. Medical supplies cannot be used as weapons by terrorists. There is no justification for denying medicine and medical supplies to the wounded and sick.

The first humanitarian convoy that received authorization from the Syrian regime to deliver aid to eastern Ghouta was not able to fully unload because of resumed fighting. The convoy that arrived last Friday was finally able to deliver aid, including medical supplies, for 27,500 people. However, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is still waiting for authorization to complete the delivery to Douma for all 70,000 people, as initially approved by the Syrian authorities. We call on all parties to immediately allow sustained and unimpeded access to deliver supplies to people in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. That applies to eastern Ghouta and to all in need throughout the country.

On my second point, the cessation of hostilities and the need for monitoring, resolution 2401 (2018) calls for an immediate nationwide cessation of hostilities. A strong monitoring mechanism is needed urgently in order to ensure implementation. We agree with the French proposal in that regard. Since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), air strikes have continued, even increased, especially on eastern Ghouta.

We hear the Russian Federation say that those strikes are targeted at terrorists. However, we underline once more that the exemption to the ceasefire for attacks directed at United Nations-listed terrorist groups does not provide an excuse to ignore the basic principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. According to the latest report of the Commission of Inquiry, the siege of eastern Ghouta continues to be characterized by the use of prohibited weapons and attacks against civilian and protected objects, which we condemn in the strongest terms.

We also condemn the shelling of Damascus from eastern Ghouta. We call upon all parties to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law at all times. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura should facilitate negotiations between armed opposition groups, the Syrian regime and Russia in order to advance the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

One concrete and helpful step is to evacuate United Nations-listed terrorist groups from eastern Ghouta. A first evacuation of 13 imprisoned terrorist fighters reportedly took place last Friday. It is crucial that any evacuation of armed fighters take place in a safe and orderly fashion. We call on the United Nations to prepare for putting in place the necessary monitoring mechanisms in that regard. We call on Russia to accept the offer of the Special Envoy to facilitate further evacuation of United Nations-listed terrorist groups from eastern Ghouta. Civilians should never be forced to leave against their will. Forced displacement may constitute a war crime.

On my third point, the credibility and accountability of the Council, despite the unanimous adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) we have seen no cessation of hostilities. We have seen no significant improvement in the humanitarian situation on the ground in Syria. This also has a negative impact on the credibility of the Council. It is vital for the functioning of the rules-based international order that decisions of the Council be respected and implemented. As a Council, we have a collective responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. However, we should not forget that the responsibility and, indeed, the obligation to execute its decisions lies with individual Member States.

The human suffering in Syria, especially in eastern Ghouta, must end now. We need a full cessation of hostilities in all of Syria, including eastern Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin. And we call on the Russian Federation in particular to use its influence and to do its utmost to achieve that, thereby also upholding the Council's credibility.

In conclusion, the siege of eastern Ghouta is entering its fifth year. The war in Syria will enter its eighth year later this week, on 15 March, as others have noted. One wonders how the Syrian regime thinks to ever achieve the legitimacy to govern the people it now pounds into submission or death.

As the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated during the thirty-seventh session of the Human Rights Council, "what we are seeing in eastern Ghouta are likely war crimes and potentially crimes against humanity". The perpetrators of these crimes must know they are being identified, that dossiers are being built up with a view to their prosecution, and that they will be held accountable for what they have done.

We thank the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic for its important work to date. We recall the resolution of the Human Rights Council of 5 March, which calls on the Commission to investigate the situation in eastern Ghouta. We call on all Council members to support the referral of the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria to the International Criminal Court. We also urge all States to increase their support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for the Syrian Arab Republic.

For now, however, our common efforts should be directed at securing immediate relief for those millions in Syria in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. For that, we need the cessation of hostilities to be implemented immediately and in a sustained manner. We need a continuous pause in the fighting of 30 days, as demanded by resolution 2401 (2018). If its implementation continues to fail, that will require a response from the Council that goes beyond where we stand now.

We thank the Secretary-General for his perseverance and endless efforts to uphold the norms and values of the Charter of the United Nations, international human rights law and international humanitarian law, as well as to promote compliance with resolution 2401 (2018). We call on all Council members to follow his example.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I wish to again remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously.

I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I will not begin by commenting on the procedural point that you have raised, Mr. President, but rather I will focus on the essential issues that

are supposed to be of interest to the members of the Security Council.

I welcome the Secretary-General and note the statement at the outset of his briefing that the Secretariat does not have all the necessary information to carefully access the situation on the ground because the United Nations does not have a presence in all areas. The Secretariat humbly and politely said those words, noting that it does not have full, relevant information pertaining to the Syrian situation, although the United Nations has a branch of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Damascus and there are dozens of United Nations agencies operating in Syria, in addition to 13 international non-governmental organizations also operating there.

However, some of our colleagues in the Security Council, who have shut down their embassies in Damascus and are now completely disconnected from credible information, instead rely on information from what is known as open sources. They have provided a vast amount of information that would never serve the interests of the Syrian people or of those present in such an important and significant discussion. That information is misleading and could poison the atmosphere and fuel sedition regarding the role of the Security Council, which is mandated to maintain international peace and security.

The Syrian Government stands ready to engage seriously with positive international initiatives that serve the interests of the Syrian people, especially in ending the bloodshed throughout Syria, as stated in resolution 2401 (2018). My country has expressed its satisfaction with resolution 2401 (2018), particularly the positive provisions contained therein. In that regard, my country confirms that it has taken all the following procedures to relieve the suffering of our people in eastern Ghouta.

First, immediately after the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), hostilities were ceased on a daily basis from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. Damascus local time, and remain so to this very moment, with the aim of delivering humanitarian aid and ensuring the unimpeded and safe exit of civilians from the areas controlled by terrorist groups. Secondly, two safe humanitarian corridors have been opened for civilians wishing to exit the area. Thirdly, two joint United Nations-International Committee of the Red Cross convoys, in collaboration with the Syrian Red Crescent, were sent to eastern Ghouta on 5 and 9 March.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, all those procedures have been countered by the terror of armed organizations present in Ghouta. Incited by their masters — some of them, unfortunately, members of the Security Council — these organizations have targeted civilians in Damascus since the beginning of the year, firing more than 2,499 missiles and mortars that have claimed the lives of 70 civilian martyrs and injured 556 people. Those organizations have prevented our people in eastern Ghouta from leaving in order to continue to use them as human shields and material for humanitarian and media blackmail. They have even targeted those who managed to escape towards the two corridors by firing bullets and missiles.

The latest incident in Syria occurred on 8 March, when the so-called Faylaq Al-Rahman — one of the terrorist arms of the petty State of Qatar in Syria — targeted a civilian convoy heading towards one of the corridors, leading to high casualties among civilians. By the way, that terrorist organization, Faylaq Al-Rahman, has been hailed by some of those present because of its readiness to implement resolution 2401 (2018). They presented it as a part of the moderate Syrian opposition, and distributed a letter signed by that and other terrorist organizations, addressed to the Secretary-General. That is the modus operandi of the Security Council with terrorist groups.

The procedures taken by the Syrian Government are not limited to eastern Ghouta. Over the past few days, the Government has undertaken a number of other procedures. First, we have requested that the United Nations and a number of humanitarian organizations immediately send a mission to investigate the humanitarian situation in Raqqa, which was destroyed by the International Coalition led by the United States of America. Secondly, we have requested approval to send humanitarian convoys to the Rukban camp, provided that the aid is delivered and distributed by the Syrian Red Crescent and the Red Cross exclusively, and not by the United States occupation authorities or the terrorist groups in Rukban camp and Tanaf area. Thirdly, two days ago the Syrian Red Crescent obtained Government approval to send convoys to Ghouta, Raqqa, Afrin and Rukban. To date, it has not sent the convoys to Rukban and Afrin because the United Nations failed to ensure the necessary safeguards from the United States and Turkish occupation forces. That is the reason.

With every advance by the Syrian Army against terrorist groups in any given area, the States sponsoring terrorism launch heated disinformation campaigns to distract the world from the terrorism, aggression and occupation against Syria. The inference is that those countries have never been keen to protec the lives of civilians, but prefer to protect their investments in terrorism after they have spent billions of dollars on it, as was said by the previous Prime Minister of Qatar, in order to recycle terrorism elsewhere in Syria.

The behaviour that I have mentioned is not limited to State-sponsored terrorism, unfortunately. It has even been demonstrated by some senior officials of the Secretariat. We had hoped that the Secretariat, especially in the light of the second preambular paragraph of resolution 2401 (2018), would provide an unequivocal legal description of the crimes committed by the so-called International Coalition led by the United States against our Syrian people in Raqqa and other places, and the procedures to ensure the end of that aggression. We had also hoped that the Secretariat would provide us with an unequivocal legal description of the acts of invasion by Turkish forces of a precious part of our national territory, especially against our civilian people in Afrin, and the procedures to ensure the end of the Turkish aggression. We had also hoped for an unequivocal legal description of the presence of the United States forces on Syrian territory without the approval of the Syrian Government and the procedures to ensure the end of that occupation.

The government of my country affirms its right to defend its citizens and combat terrorism in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions, especially the second preambular paragraph of resolution 2401 (2018); fight all those who practice, fund and support terrorism; work towards restoring security stability and peace; and rebuild all that has been destroyed by terrorists and their masters.

Finally, I have listened to my colleague the representative of the United States, who levels charges again and again against my country before all who are present and says that her country will take military actions against my country outside the legitimacy of the Council if chemical substances are used, just as its administration in Washington, D.C., did when it bombarded Al-Shayrat air base in my country last year. These irresponsible and provocative statements, which run counter to the Charter of the United Nations, are direct incitement to terrorist groups to use chemical weapons and fabricate anew all the evidence needed to accuse the Syrian Army, as they have done in previous times. I remind the representative of the United States that the former Joint Investigative Mechanism refused to take samples from Al-Shayrat air base because if it had done so it would have been categorically proved that the Syrian Government is not responsible for the incident in Khan Shaykhun. In fact, what the United States perpetrated against that Syrian air base was a full-fledged aggression.

I call on the representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom and France to put an end to their violations of Security Council resolutions related to fighting terrorism, and on their Governments to stop supporting the terrorist groups in my country and cease providing them with a political umbrella to pursue their crimes against the Syrian people. It is high time that the United States Administration learn from its mistakes and stop repeating them. Is it not enough what they have done in Viet Nam, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Yemen, invoking very cheap lies that have already been condemned and denounced by international public opinion? In this regard, I recall the words of Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel laureate:

> "They are liars, they know they are liars, and they know that we know that they are liars. However, they still lie, and very loudly so."

In conclusion, the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic issued a statement a few minutes ago that street battles have begun in Ghouta, following the demands for the separation of the aforementioned Faylaq Al-Rahman and Jabhat Al-Nusra. This current street fighting impedes the evacuation of civilians who are forced to find safe haven underground in Ghouta.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 1.20 p.m.